

On Tuesday evening, the House finally passed a \$50.4 billion disaster relief bill that will help New Jersey and other states rebuild after Hurricane Sandy.

That's the good news – and it is, to be sure, very good news. For the tens of thousands of New Jerseyans still working hard to recover from the storm, this bill will make a real difference. It provides significant emergency support to FEMA and the Small Business Administration, and it invests wisely in preventing future disasters.

But the vote also reflects a deeply troubling trend in our politics. It is troubling that Congress would hesitate and debate for months whether we would rebuild after a hurricane. It is alarming that, when Congress finally decided to act, the bill passed mostly along party lines, with small Republican support and that small Republican support coming almost entirely from northeastern states or from states usually affected by hurricanes.

Does this mean disaster relief has become a partisan or regional issue, rather than a shared commitment to aid our fellow citizens who fall victim to nature's wrath? Congress seems to be losing its belief in a great America, a country that doesn't for a moment think that natural disaster or hardship will set us back.

Not Just Tears. Action.

President Obama this week unveiled a wide-ranging set of proposals to rein in gun violence, drawing on the recommendations of a task force led by Vice President Biden. Already the President has taken meaningful steps to help track the flow of firearms and to support research into gun deaths, but as he was quick to point out, real progress will require Congress to act.

And act we must. For decades, too many in Washington have stood passively by as our schoolchildren and moviegoers and worshippers and police officers and so many others have been gunned down. This shameful inaction must end.

First and foremost, we must enact a permanent ban on military-style assault weapons. Of course, Congress will protect the right of law-abiding Americans to own firearms that are useful for sport or self-defense. But semi-automatic weapons and high-capacity magazines have no legitimate use whatsoever outside of police and military forces. These military-style assault weapons are useful only to criminals who wish to commit mass murder, and they should be banned once and for all.

We must also make sensible investments in strengthening mental health care. To be clear, the NRA lobbyists who claim that this step alone is sufficient to rein in gun violence are self-serving and wrong-headed. Better access to mental health care will likely play only a modest role in preventing gun murders – but it could play a critical role in preventing gun *suicides*, which represent the majority of all gun deaths. Moreover, better mental health care in America is an end worth pursuing in itself.

Finally, we must recognize the crucial role of law enforcement in preventing gun violence. In particular, the President is right to emphasize the value of school resource officers: specially trained law enforcement officers who work in schools every day. These resource officers do much more than just staff metal detectors or respond to violent crises. They work within schools day in and day out to build trust, create a culture of nonviolence, and strengthen respect for the law. We should invest in placing trained school resource officers in every school in America, and I plan to introduce legislation in the weeks ahead to help make that possible.

To hear the stories of the little children and the teachers murdered in Newtown makes you want to cry. But even more than that, it should make us want to act.

Forty Years of Scientists on Capitol Hill

So many of the challenging issues that Congress deals with every day, from climate change to internet security to national defense to space exploration, demand expert-level knowledge of science and technology. Yet most members of Congress do not have a scientific background, and even those of us who are trained as scientists cannot possibly hope to be an expert in every field. Where can we turn for much-needed expertise?

For the past four decades, the American Association for the Advance of Science (AAAS) has

helped to answer that question through its Science & Technology Policy Fellowships program. In 1973, AAAS societies selected seven scientists and engineers to work for a year in a Congressional office, providing their expertise to Congress and learning about the political process. In the decades since, the program has expanded, and its alumni have brought their experiences to high-level positions throughout the government and the private sector.

I owe a great debt to the AAAS Fellows program: I was a AAAS fellow in 1982, and I have been honored in my time as a member of Congress to host many fellows in my office. To celebrate the program's 40th anniversary, I recently joined several other past fellows to contribute to a short documentary about the program's impact. The result, an engaging 16-minute video, is [now available online](#).

Sincerely,

Rush Holt
Member of Congress